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DOE clueless on Yucca

By Matthew L. Wald

New York Times News Service

WASHINGTON - The Energy Department no longer has an estimate of when it can open the nuclear waste repository that it wants to build at Yucca Mountain, 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas, and it may never have an accurate prediction of the cost, the energy secretary said Monday.

Energy Secretary Samuel W. Bodman said at a nuclear power industry conference that his department was redoing research and design for Yucca, which was supposed to start accepting civilian power-plant waste in 1998. But it is a first-of-a-kind project, making cost estimates difficult, he said, and the best that the department may be able to do is publish an estimate with a very wide range of error.

Last week Deputy Energy Secretary Clay Sell hinted for the first time that the money that the Energy Department had been collecting from the nuclear utilities since the 1980s might not be enough to pay for the project; the last published cost estimate was \$60 billion, in 2001. The last date given for its planned opening, provided a year ago, was 2012. The department is facing lawsuits from utilities that want to recover extra costs created by the delay.

Bodman spoke Monday to hundreds of nuclear industry executives at a conference organized by Platts, an energy information division of McGraw-Hill. Other speakers said that various companies were considering building as many as 16 new reactors soon; none has been ordered in this country since the 1970s.

A lawyer in the audience asked how the industry could build new plants without assurances of a plan for the waste, as the Nuclear Regulatory Commission requires.

Bodman did not answer, but instead began describing the problems of the Yucca project.

For one, he said, government scientists and their commercial contractors were trying to cope with research work that was done poorly by the U.S. Geological Survey. Another problem is a court decision that forced the Environmental Protection Agency to publish standards governing leakage of radioactive waste for 1 million years, he said; initially the Energy Department had planned on a timeline of 10,000

years.

In addition, he said, the project managers recently decided that they had to space the waste more widely to prevent temperature inside the mountain from reaching the boiling point because the effects of steam are more difficult to predict.

"There are problems with the U.S. Geological Survey work that was done, there are problems with the EPA standards that are there, there are problems with the efforts of the Department of Energy. There's plenty of blame to go around," Bodman said.

His comments came more than six years after the Energy Department issued a "viability assessment" asserting that the mountain could hold waste from power plants and nuclear weapons plants, and two years after the department had planned to submit an application to get a license for the project.

Bodman had been invited to talk about the Bush administration's new Global Nuclear Energy Partnership, a plan that includes reprocessing nuclear waste to reduce its volume and toxicity. Despite a spirited description of the program, he got no questions on that subject.

Some in the industry said, though, that the partnership introduced a new complication for Yucca. If used reactor fuel were put through a factory to recover reusable parts, as the proposal calls for, the new waste could not be buried at Yucca until the project was reanalyzed, they said.

Another complication is that the department recently told utilities that they should ship fuel to Yucca in containers that could go directly into the mountain for burial. But some of the waste is now packaged in other kinds of containers, in locations where the reactors have been torn down, which means there is no easy way to repackage the materials.

Other nuclear professionals present, including Nuclear Regulatory Commission Chairman Nils J. Diaz, predicted that the nation would shift to a system of above-ground interim storage and perhaps the solution called for in the nuclear partnership: breaking up old nuclear fuel to recover reusable materials. But this could help spread material useful in nuclear weapons.

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